

[Finding Flow - The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life - 1997](#)

[Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#)

My Summary and Notes

Chapter 1 - The Structure of Everyday Life

If we don't take **control** of life's direction our life will be controlled by the outside to serve the purpose of some other **agency**. We can not expect anyone to help us live; we must discover how to do it **ourselves**.

So what does "to live" mean in this context? Obviously, it doesn't refer simply to biological survival. It must mean to live in fullness, without waste of **time** and **potential**, expressing one's **uniqueness**, yet participating intimately in the complexity of the cosmos and **integrating** with others in our circle of influence.

What makes a life serene, useful, and worth living?

Three Main Assumptions

1. Prophets, poets, and philosophers have gleaned important **truths** in the past, truths that are essential for our continued survival. The sacred books of **religion** are the best repositories of the ideas that mattered most to our ancestors, and to ignore them is an act of childish conceit.
2. **Science** provides the most vital information to humankind. However, shortcuts are dangerous; we cannot delude ourselves that our knowledge is further along than it actually is. Science, however, at this time, is still the most trustworthy mirror of reality and we ignore it only at our peril.
3. If we wish to understand what real **living** entails, we should listen to the voices of the past, and integrate their messages with the knowledge that science is slowly accumulating. The only path to finding out what life is about is a patient, slow attempt to make sense of the realities of the **past** and the possibilities of the **future** as they can be understood in the **present**.

The **actual** quality of life - what we do and how we feel about it - will be determined by our thoughts and emotions; by the **interpretations** we give to chemical, biological, and social processes.

Systematic **phenomenology** makes use of the tools of the social sciences - primarily psychology and sociology - in order to answer the question: What is life like? And the more practical question: How can each person create an excellent life?

The first step in answering such questions involves getting a good grasp of the forces that shape what we can experience. Each of us is constrained by limits on what we can do and feel. To ignore these limits leads to denial and eventually failure.

Because the nervous system is so constructed that it can only process a small amount of information at any given moment, most of what we can experience must be experienced **serially**, one thing after the other. Thus, the limitations on **attention**, which determines the amount of psychic energy we have for experiencing the world, provide an **inflexible** script for us to live by.

If everything was determined by the common human condition, by social and cultural categories, and by chance, it would be useless to reflect on ways to make one's life excellent. Fortunately, there is enough room for personal **initiative** and **choice** to make a real difference. And those who believe this are the ones with the best chance to break free from the grip of fate.

To live means to **experience** - through doing, feeling, thinking. Experience takes place in **time**, so time is the ultimate scarce resource we have. Over the years, the **content** of experience will determine the **quality** of life. Therefore one of the most essential decisions any of us can make is about **how** one's time is allocated or **invested**.

What do you do with **your** time?

What we do during an average day can be divided into three major kinds of activities:

1. **Productive Activities** - The first and largest includes what we must do in order to generate energy for survival and comfort. For young people, school would be considered in this category. Although typically Americans define themselves by a "40 hour" work week, they only work about 30 - the remainder being spent in talking/meetings, daydreaming, making lists, and other things irrelevant to work production.

2. **Maintenance Activities** - work that keeps the body in shape by eating, resting, grooming; our possessions by cleaning, cooking, shopping, and all sorts of housework. In most cultures, the vast majority of these activities are accomplished by women.

3. **Leisure Activities** - free time when not engaged in productive or maintenance activities (about 25% of our waking hours). According to the Greek philosophers, it is during leisure that we become truly human by devoting time to self-improvement - to learning, to arts and to political activity.

In Western society, LEISURE is occupied by three major kinds of activity, taking up 4-12 hours each week:

1. Media consumption
2. Conversation

3. Hobbies, art/making music, engaging in sports/exercise

Nothing people have done so far during the millions of years of evolution has been as passive, as addictive in the ease with which it attracts attention and keeps hold of it is watching TV or “engaging” with the Internet - unless we count staring into space (or scrolling social media).

Thus, in essence, what our life is consists in experience related to work, to keeping things we already have from falling apart, and to whatever else we do in our free time. It is within these parameters that life unfolds, and it is how we choose **what** we do, and **how** we approach it, that will determine whether the sum of our days adds up to a **formless blur**, or to something resembling a **work of art**.

Everyday life is defined not only by what we do, but also by **who** we are with. Our actions and feelings are always influenced by other people, whether they are present or not. Humans are social animals; both physically and psychologically we depend on the company of others.

Most people spend equal amounts of time in three Social contexts:

1. The **public space** is made up of strangers, coworkers, friends or fellow students and is where one’s actions are evaluated by others, where one competes for resources, and where one might establish collaborative relationships with others. High risk but high reward.
2. The **family** is made up of, for children, their parents and siblings and for adults, their partners, spouses, and children. No matter how strange nowadays some of our reconstituted families are in comparison with an ideal nuclear family, close relatives still provide a unique bond of experience.
3. **Solitude** is the context defined by the absence of other people. In Western societies we can spend as much as one-third of the day alone, which for most people, is undesirable. Although it is possible to learn to enjoy solitude, it seems to be a rare and acquired taste. However, many of the obligations of daily life require us to be alone, to study, practice and accomplish work in many forms.

How do individuals find out what they do with their time?

The most common ways to find out about what people do with their time is through polls, surveys, and time budgets, asking people to fill out a diary at the end of the day or week. They are easy to administer, but because they are based on recollection, are not very precise.

Another method is the **Experience Sampling Method** (ESM), which uses a pager/phone app to signal people to fill out two pages in a booklet they carry with them. Signals are programmed to go off at random times within 2-hour segments each day, from early in the morning until 11pm or

later. At the signal you write down: where you are, what you are doing, what you are thinking about, who you are with and then rate your state of consciousness at the moment on various numerical scales - how happy you are, how much you are concentrating, how strongly you are motivated, how your self-esteem is, etc. At the end of a week, a person will have filled out up to 56 pages of the ESM booklet, providing a virtual film strip of their daily activities and experiences.

Chapter 2 - The Content of Experience

While what we do day in and day out has a lot to do with what kind of life we have, how we **experience** what we do is even more important. However, we find ourselves in a paradoxical position when we look at other people, discounting what they say and trusting only what they do; whereas when we look at ourselves we take our inner feelings more seriously than outside events or overt actions.

Psychologists have identified up to **nine basic emotions** that can reliably be identified by facial expressions among people in most cultures. All humans seem to share the ability to see, speak and experience a range of feelings. Some of these are **genetically** wired emotions that tend to relate specifically to our evolutionary past - our ability to procreate and to avoid danger. However, the evolution of **self-reflective consciousness** has allowed our race to “toy” with feelings, to fake or manipulate feelings in ways that no other animal can. Originally, emotions served as signals about the outside world; now they are often detached from any real object, **to be indulged in for their own sake**.

Since the earliest days of human self-reflection, **happiness** has been the prototype of the positive emotions, that everything we do is ultimately aimed at experiencing happiness. We want **things** because we hope that they will make us happy. We seek it for its own sake.

Despite problems and tragedies all over the world people tend to describe themselves as more happy than unhappy. Postmodernists, like [Michel Foucault](#), say that what people tell us does not reflect real events, but only a style of narrative, a way of talking that refers only to itself. [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) said that most people live with “false consciousness”, pretending even to themselves that they are living in the best of all possible worlds. Or, you could consider the arrogance of these views, and that no one has the right to ignore a person’s subjective statement that they are “pretty happy”, or interpret it to mean the opposite.

People who live in nations that are materially better off and politically more stable rate themselves happier - but not always. But within the same society there is only a very **weak** relationship between finances and satisfaction with life. **Beyond the threshold of poverty**, additional resources do not appreciably improve the chances of being happy

Happiness is more a personal characteristic than a situational one. Over time, people come to think of themselves as happy regardless of external conditions, while others will become used to feeling relatively less happy no matter what happens to them. Our emotional states depend a lot on what we **do**, and what we do, in turn, will affect our emotional states. This loop can be controlled either consciously or unconsciously. We can either let our past and unconscious mind control our emotional states or we can consciously control them.

The **choice** is there at any moment, whether we subjectively believe that reality or not.

If one fails to develop **goals** that give **meaning** to one's existence, if one does not use the **mind** to its fullest, then good feelings fulfill just a fraction of the potential we possess. **Emotions** refer to the inner state of consciousness. Negative emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, or boredom, produce "**psychic entropy**" (chaos) in the mind, that is, a state in which we cannot use **attention** effectively to deal with external tasks, because we need it to restore an inner subjective order.

Intentions, goals, and motivations are manifestations of "**psychic negentropy**", they focus psychic energy, establish priorities, and thus create order in consciousness. Without them mental processes become **random**, and feelings tend to deteriorate rapidly. People tend to feel best when what they do is voluntary, they do not feel worst when what they do is obligatory.

Psychic entropy (chaos) is **highest** when persons feel that what they do is motivated by not having anything else to do.

Intentions focus psychic energy in the short run, whereas **goals** tend to be more long-term, and eventually the goals we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of self that we are to become. Without a consistent set of goals, it is difficult to develop a coherent self.

It is through this patterned investment of psychic energy provided by goals that one creates order in experience. This order, which manifests itself in predictable actions, emotions, and choices, in time becomes recognizable as a more or less **UNIQUE SELF**.

The goals one endorses also determines one's self-esteem. As [William James](#) pointed out over a hundred years ago, **self-esteem** depends on the ratio of expectation to successes. A person may develop low self-esteem either because he sets his goals too high, or because he achieves too few successes. So it is not necessarily true that the person who achieves the most will have the highest self-esteem. It is also not necessarily true that lowering expectations will result in a true increase of self-esteem, **especially with children**.

Learning to manage one's goals is an important step in achieving excellence in everyday life. To do so, however, does not involve either the extreme of spontaneity (that we should distrust via Eastern religion) on the one hand, or compulsive control (dictated by genetics and culture) on the other. We must understand the **root** of our motivations and while recognizing the **biases** involved in our desires, in all humbleness choose goals that will provide order in our consciousness without causing much disorder in the social or material environment. To try for less than this is to forfeit the chance of developing your potential, and to try for much more is to set yourself up for defeat.

THINKING, cognitive mental operations, is a complex subject. In relation to everyday life, what we call thinking is a process whereby psychic energy gets ordered.

1. **Emotions** focus attention by mobilizing the entire organism in an approach or avoidance mode.
2. **Intentions/Goals** focus attention by providing images of desired outcomes
3. **Thoughts** order attention by producing sequences of images that are related to each other in some meaningful way.

By now it is probably apparent that emotions, intentions and thoughts do not pass through consciousness as separate strands of experience, but that they are constantly **interconnected**, and **modify** each other as they go along.

To pursue mental operations to any depth, a person has to learn to concentrate **attention**. Without focus, consciousness is in a state of **chaos**. The normal condition of the mind is one of **informational disorder**: random thoughts chase one another instead of lining up in logical causal sequences. Unless one learns to concentrate, and is able to invest the effort, thoughts will scatter without reaching any conclusion. An endless loop of nothingness, much like scrolling social media.

Concentration requires more effort when it goes against the grain of emotions and motivations. When a person **likes** what he does and is **motivated** to do it, focusing the mind becomes effortless even when the objective difficulties are great.

Intelligence refers to a variety of mental processes; for instance, how easily one can represent and manipulate quantities in the mind, or how sensitive one is to information indexed in words. But as [Howard Gardner](#) has shown, it is possible to extend the concept of intelligence to include the ability to differentiate and to use all kinds of information, including muscle sensations, sounds, feelings, and visual shapes. But innate talents cannot develop into a mature intelligence unless a person learns to control **attention**. By learning to concentrate, a person acquires **control over psychic energy**, the basic fuel upon which all thinking depends.

In **everyday life**, it is rare for the different contents of experience to be in synchrony with each other. Seldom do we feel the serenity that comes when heart, will, and mind are on the same

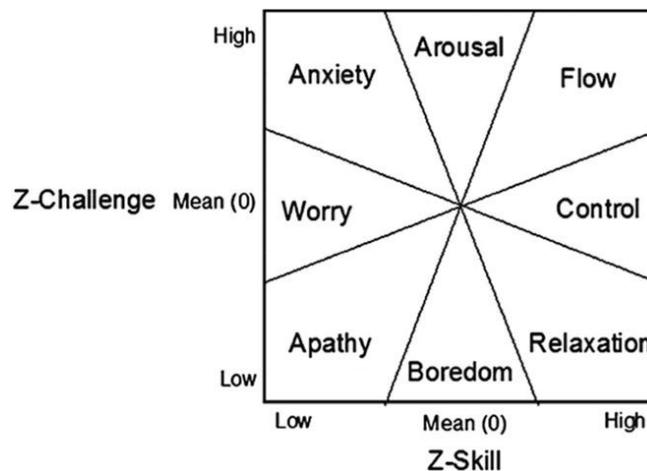
page. Conflicting desires, intentions, and thoughts jostle each other in consciousness, and we are helpless to keep them in line.

Now we can consider an alternative - complete immersion in an activity that is full of experiences that are in harmony with each other. Contrary to what happens all too often in everyday life, in moments such as these, what we feel - what we wish - what we think - are in perfect **harmony**. These exceptional moments are called **FLOW EXPERIENCES**. The metaphor of “flow” is one that many have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives.

Why do we fill our lives with anything else?
We don't, consciously. We do so, **unconsciously**.

Flow tends to occur when:

1. A person faces a **clear set of choices**, like chess and tennis, because they have goals that are clear and compatible and rules for action. Everything is black and white.
2. The activity provides **immediate feedback** that tells you how well or poorly you are doing.
3. A person's skills are involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable. When **high challenges** are matched with **high skills**, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur.



Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely **focused**. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does **becomes worth doing for its own sake**; living becomes its own justification. In this harmonious place, life finally comes into its own.

When we are in flow, we are **not happy**, because to experience happiness we must focus on our inner states, and that would take away attention from the task at hand. It is the full involvement of flow, rather than happiness, that makes for excellence in life.

Have we been chasing the wrong thing all these years?

We can be happy experiencing many things, but this kind of happiness is very vulnerable and dependent on favorable EXTERNAL circumstances. The happiness that follows flow is of our own making, and it leads to increasing COMPLEXITY and growth in CONSCIOUSNESS.

How can we start the process of finding “flow state”?

Learn new skills
Increase challenges

The flow state acts as a magnet for learning, that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills via **arousal** and **control**. It takes energy to achieve optimal experiences. We have to move beyond those parts of life that make us bored or apathetic. We have to chronically move beyond the sensation of being overwhelmed and work diligently on new skills and hone existing ones. It takes work to get into flow. **You have to want it.**

Only 25% of people experience flow often. At the other end of the spectrum, 15% say it never happens to them. These frequencies seem to be quite stable and universal.

Flow is generally reported when someone is doing their favorite activity. Very rarely do people report flow in passive leisure activities, such as watching television or relaxing. And yet, **almost any activity can produce flow** provided the relevant elements above are present.

Chapter 3 - How We Feel When Doing Different Things

Work can very much be considered as a possible flow activity since challenges and skills tend to be high and goals and feedback are often clear and immediate. At the same time, when adults work, or when children do school work, they tend to be less happy than average and their

motivation is considerably below normal. However, their level of concentration is relatively quite high. Lastly, work can have parts that produce flow, and others that do not.

Maintenance activities are quite varied in their experiential profile. Few people enjoy housework although cooking is often a positive experience. Personal care is neither positive or negative. Eating is one of the most positive parts of the day in terms of affect and motivation, whereas it is low in cognitive activity and seldom an occasion for flow. Driving a car is surprisingly positive and some people experience flow more often while driving than any other part of their lives.

Leisure tends to include the more positive experiences of the day. **Passive leisure**, which includes media consumption and resting is motivating and produces happiness but involves little mental focus, and rarely produces flow. Socializing is generally highly positive though it seldom involves high mental concentration. Romance and sex provide some of the best moments of the day, but for most people, these activities are rather rare, so they fail to make much of a difference in the overall quality of life. **Active leisure** produces extremely positive experiences. Hobbies, exercise, playing musical instruments or outings to movies or restaurants tend to produce happiness, motivation and concentration and thus flow - that in any other part of the day. It is in the contexts that all the various dimensions of experience are most intensely focused and in harmony with each other.

When we look at all of the above, active leisure provides the best experience overall, while housework, personal care and idling provide the worst.

The inertia of habit and social pressure are so strong that many people have **no idea** which components of their lives they actually enjoy (or experience flow), and which contribute to stress and depression, or that they are actually in **complete control of their lives**. Simply increasing time engaged in positive experiences and decreasing that of the others is a solid first step to moving the totality of life towards potential flow experiencing activities on a more regular basis.

A major feature of daily rhythms is going in and out of **solitude**. Alone a person generally reports low happiness, aversive motivation, low concentration, apathy, passivity, loneliness, detachment and low self-esteem. For most, the reason is that when we have to interact with another person, even a stranger, our attention becomes structured by external demands. Even the simplest interaction has its own challenges, which we confront with our interpersonal skills. Thus interactions with people have many of the characteristics of flow activities - **the orderly investment of psychic energy**. Although difficult, developing the ability to tolerate solitude, and even enjoy it, is very useful in the long run.

Being with **friends** provides the most positive experiences. The importance of friendships on well-being is difficult to overestimate. The quality of life improves immensely when there is at least one other person who is **willing** to listen, empathize and support us.

Experience with **family** tends to be average, not as good as with friends, but not as bad as when alone. But this average is also the result of wide swings; one can be extremely aggravated in one moment and thoroughly ecstatic the next.

Companionship has a strong effect on the quality of experience. For real growth, it is necessary to find people whose opinions are **interesting** and whose conversation is **stimulating**.

Locations also have an effect on the quality of experience. Teenagers and adults tend to prefer **public spaces** in the company of friends and involved in voluntary leisure activities. For many people **driving a car** gives the most consistent sense of freedom and control with the ability to concentrate without interruptions. For many families, the car is also the location for togetherness.

Different rooms of the house also have their peculiar emotional profile, a setting for a different activity. **Men** tend to like basements and sheds if engaging in hobbies and leisure while **women** tend to enjoy time in the bathroom - where they are free from demands of others - and in the kitchen - where they are in high concentration and control.

Much has been written about how the **environment** in which one lives affects one's mind. If we are to trust the reports of creative thinkers and artists, congenial (pleasant and pleasing) surroundings are often the source of inspiration and creativity. If one reads the biographies of people like [Franz Liszt](#) (composer), [Manfred Eigen](#) (chemist) or [Niels Bohr](#) (physicist), **one would get the impression that without hikes in the mountains and vision of night skies their science would not have amounted to much.**

To make a creative change in the quality of experience, it would be useful to **experiment** with one's surroundings as well as with activities and companions. Taking charge of one's home or office environment, throwing out the excess, redecorating, making things more personal and psychologically comfortable - could be the first step in **reordering one's life**.

The way each day is experienced changes considerably from morning to night. Early mornings and late nights are low on many of the positive emotions, mealtimes and afternoons are high. However, not all the contents of consciousness travel in the same direction. **Morning** persons and **night** persons relate to time of day in opposite ways.

Despite the bad reputation of certain **days of the week**, on the whole people seem to experience each day more or less like the next. Interestingly, people report more physical symptoms, such as headaches and backaches, on weekends and at times when they are not studying or working. When psychic energy is not committed to a definite task it is easier to notice what goes wrong with our bodies - and our world.

Again, with time of day as with the other parameters of life, it is important to find out what rhythms are most congenial to **you**.

Experiment and reflect on the possibilities. In all the examples above, we proceeded as if persons were passive objects whose internal states are affected by what they do, who they are with, where they are, and so forth. While this in part, in the last analysis it is not the external conditions that count, but **what we make of them**. In other words, the excellence of daily life finally depends not on what we do, but **how** we do it.

The first step in improving the quality of life is to pay close attention to what we do every day, and notice how we feel in different activities, places, times of day and with different companions. There is no law that says we all have to experience life in the same way. What is vital is to find out what works out best for each one of us. Then, and only then, can we attempt to integrate that honest knowledge of self as we fold it into healthy and stimulating relationships with others.

Chapter 4 - The Paradox of Work

Work generally takes up a third of our waking hours and while it provides some of the most intense and satisfying moments, giving us a sense of pride and identity, it is something most of us are glad to avoid. According to several ESM studies, when people are signaled at work they endorse the item "I wish I was doing something else" more than at any other time of the day.

Because work is so important in terms of the amount of time it takes and the intensity of effects it produces in consciousness, it is essential to face up to its ambiguities and understand how it has evolved in history if one wishes to improve the quality of life.

Work as we know it didn't exist until the great agricultural revolutions that made intensive farming possible thousands of years ago. Before then, there was no such thing as working for someone else; for hunter-gatherers **work was seamlessly integrated with the rest of life**.

In the classical Western civilizations of Greece and Rome, philosophers reflected the public opinion about work, which was that it should be avoided at all costs. **Idleness was considered a virtue**. The ideal was to conquer or buy productive land, and then hire or enslave others to work and cultivate it. Members of the ruling class volunteered their time to fill military and administrative duties that helped the community and gave room for personal potential to expand. But after centuries of ease, the idle classes withdrew from public life and used their free time to consume luxury and entertainment instead.

Until the 13th century, almost all energy for work depended on human or animal muscle. Slowly, **technology** revolutionized the way we transform energy and make a living starting with windmills, then steam engines, electricity and the internal combustion engine. An offshoot of these technologies was that work, instead of being seen as simply a physical effort, began to be

seen as a skilled activity, a manifestation of human ingenuity and creativity. It then made sense to take the “work ethic” seriously.

During the decades of affluence following World War II, most jobs, although boring and bland, provided decent conditions and reasonable security. With the rise of **global competition** over time, people have had to work more often in arbitrary conditions and without much security about the future. A deep ambiguity of work still haunts us to this day.

With each generation, work becomes an increasingly fuzzy concept, and it becomes harder for young people to know what jobs will be waiting for them when they grow up and how to prepare for them. **One major deficiency** of the American education system is that we continue supporting these contextual concepts - that life is about jobs, about working for someone else - instead of teaching young people to create and own their own businesses and therefore - their lives.

In the past, children from an early age participated in their **parents’ work**, and gradually found themselves performing as productive adults in seamless fashion. This still exists to a certain extent now. In this life context, there are no options to choose from, there is only a single path to productive adulthood. With the creation of cities specialized jobs started to appear. Around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries large numbers of young people began to move from farms to cities to try their luck in the **new urban economy**, mostly in what is now called the service industry.

The situation is very different now - adolescents have **unrealistically** high expectations of becoming professionals. The lack of realism about future career options is in part due to the rapidly changing nature of adult jobs, but it is also caused by many young people’s isolation from meaningful job opportunities and adult working models. **Exposure** to productive tasks in the home, the neighborhood, and the community is much greater for children who grow up in wealthier and more stable environments.

According to the ESM results, young people learn their elders’ **ambivalence** toward work quite early. The split between work (and school) that is necessary but unpleasant, and pleasant but useless play, is well established by late childhood and gets more pronounced as they go through high school.

But work is definitely not the worst thing adolescents experience. The worst condition they report is when what they do is **neither like work nor like play**. When this is the case - usually in maintenance activities, passive leisure, or socialization - their self-esteem is lowest, what they do has no importance, and their happiness and motivation are below average. Yet for adolescents “neither work nor play” takes up an average **35 percent of the day**.

A person who grows up experiencing most of the day as neither important nor enjoyable is **unlikely** to find much meaning in the future.

Despite huge differences in salary, prestige and freedom, managers tend to feel only somewhat more creative and active on the job, while clerical and assembly-line workers are no more unhappy and dissatisfied.

Men and women tend to experience work outside the home in different ways. Traditionally, **men's** identity and self-respect have been based on the ability to obtain energy from the environment for their own and their families' use. This is some combination of genes and cultural expectations. **Women's** self-esteem has traditionally been based on their ability to create a physical and emotional environment suitable for the rearing of children and the comfort of grown-ups. This also arises from some combination of genes and culture.

Regardless of enlightenment, these gender stereotypes still exist. Although women tend to report relatively more positive emotions than men at work, the highest levels of self-esteem for mothers of small children were reported by women who worked the least, and the lowest by those who worked the most. And yet, all women tend to enjoy working outside the home for pay more than they enjoy working at home. This finding, of course, leads us to the strong possibility of the **ambiguous and subjective** meaning of self-esteem.

These issues bring into focus how **arbitrary** the division is between work done for pay, and the housework women have been traditionally expected to do. The cost of a mothers' nurturing of children, care of the sick, cooking, cleaning, and so forth at the market rate would double the national payroll, and perhaps force us to adopt a more **humane** economy. In the meantime, however, while doing housework may bolster a woman's self-esteem, it does not contribute much to her emotional well-being.

Work has severe drawbacks, but its lack is worse. When **idleness** is forced on someone without a handsome income, it just produces a severe drop in self-esteem, and general listlessness. Young men out of work, even when paid relatively generous unemployment compensation, have a very hard time finding satisfaction in their lives. Without the goals and challenges usually provided by a job, only a **rare self-discipline** can keep the mind focused intensely enough to insure a meaningful life.

The moments when a person is in a high-challenge, high-skill situation, accompanied by feelings of concentration, creativity, and satisfaction, were reported more often at work than at home. Thus **work tends to have the structure** of other intrinsically rewarding activities that provide flow, such as games, sports, music, and art. In comparison, much of the rest of life lacks these elements.

The quality of experience at work is generally more positive than one would expect, nevertheless, if we had the chance we would like to work less. Why is this so? Two major reasons may be involved.

The first is based on the **objective conditions** of work. It is true that since the earliest days those that paid another person's wages were not particularly with the well-being of that person. This mostly holds true even today. Therefore it is not surprising that many workers assume that intrinsic rewards from work are improbable and they must seek them elsewhere - even though this turns out not to be true.

The second reason is complementary to the first one and is based on the **historical disrepute** of work which is still transmitted by the culture and learned successively by each generation. We have moved from the horrors of the early Industrial Revolution and almost no free time to the formation of unions and additional free time, this free time becoming so large that it is seen as a social disaster by psychiatrists and sociologists. Learning to use free time beneficially turns out to be more difficult than expected.

Even though the most mundane job can enhance the quality of life, the intrinsic rewards of work are easiest to see in highly individualized professions, where a person is free to choose his or her goals and set the difficulty of the task. Highly creative artists, entrepreneurs, statesmen, and scientists experience their jobs like our hunting ancestors did theirs - **as completely integrated with the rest of their lives**. A synopsis of hundreds of interviews with such persons was: "You could say that I worked every minute of my life, or you could say with equal justice that I never worked a day."

The **joy of extending** the mind's reach into new territories is the most obvious feature of their lives, even past the age when most people are usually content to retire.

However, it is not the external conditions that determine how much work will contribute to the excellence of one's life. It is **how** one works, and what experiences one is able to derive from **confronting its challenges**.

Most creative people interviewed said that **families** were more important to them than their careers. **Stable, emotionally rewarding marriages** were the norm among them. And most such individuals fill whatever free time they have with **interesting leisure activities**. Thus love and dedication to one's calling does not have to have the negative connotations of "workaholism." These people have seemed to have found the balance that we all must seek between work, family and leisure.

Chapter 5 - The Risks and Opportunities of Leisure

One of the problems we face at this point in history is that we haven't learned how to spend free time in a sensible way, a concern that many have expressed ever since the mid-twentieth

century. Others have claimed that **whether America succeeds as a civilization** will depend on the way we use free time. Having leisure at one's disposal does not improve the quality of life unless one knows how to use it effectively, and it is by no means something learned automatically.

Without goals and without others to interact with, most people begin to lose motivation and concentration. The mind wanders and eventually focuses on **unresolvable** problems, past or present, that cause anxiety. In order to ward off the worst of this psychic entropy (chaos), the person resorts to **strategies that will calm this entropy** - watching TV, scrolling social media, reading redundant narrative books or engaging in obsessive gambling, promiscuous sexuality, or getting drunk or taking drugs.

All are quick ways to reduce chaos in consciousness in the short run, but usually the residue they leave behind is a feeling of **listless dissatisfaction**.

Apparently, our nervous system has evolved to **attend** to external signals, but has not had time to adapt to the long periods without obstacles and dangers. Given the rapidity of cultural evolution, especially the last half century, how could it? Few people have learned to structure their psychic energy **autonomously**, from the **inside**. Those cultures who have developed elaborate practices evolved successfully in keeping the mind busy - and those practices were pre-internet and still have no real connection to it. Modern screen-based activity rarely contributes to a positive quality of experience, **just avoidance of chaos**.

Active leisure has quite a different psychological effect than **passive leisure**. **Hobbies** are about two and a half times more likely to produce a state of heightened enjoyment that TV does, and **active games and sports** about three times more. Yet, we spend at least four times more of our free time watching TV (add on hours of social media "engagement") than doing hobbies and sports. Why is this so?

The typical teenager explains that to get organized for a sport takes time (and effort), practicing piano to a point where it begins to be fun takes practice (effort). In other words, each of the flow-producing activities requires an initial investment of attention before it begins to be enjoyable. One apparently needs disposable "activation energy" to enjoy complex activities. If a person **perceives** themselves to be too tired, anxious or **lacks the discipline** to overcome the initial obstacle, he or she will settle for something that, although less enjoyable, is more accessible - **and easier**. Thus the attraction of passive leisure in all its many forms. Also, active leisure activities that produce flow, being more demanding and difficult, also can produce anxiety. Passive leisure rarely does. **Thus the tradeoff** - you won't get much enjoyment and flow out of passive leisure but it's easier and rarely produces anxiety. This behavior is surely learned from **observing the adults** in their sphere of influence.

Everyone needs time to relax and unwind. As with all things in life, what matters is the dosage - the balance of all things in life. **Patterns turn into habits** and unconscious habits affect all aspects of life.

“Until you make the unconscious conscious,
it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” [Carl Jung](#)

It was found in a large scale study that the more often people report **reading books**, the more flow experiences they claim to have, while the opposite trend was found for watching TV. Adopting habits of passive leisure is not just an effect of past life or problems, but becomes a cause in its own right, which cuts off further options for improving the quality of life.

The record of some three thousand years (Greeks, Romans, the Byzantine Empire, Mayans to present day TV, sports gambling and social media) seems to suggest that a society begins to rely heavily on leisure - and especially on passive leisure - **only when it has become incapable of offering meaningful productive occupation to its members**. One can see in many instances leisure being used as an “opiate of the masses”, to paraphrase what Marx said about religion.

There are individuals who, confronted with the sterility of their jobs, escape productive responsibilities altogether to pursue a life of flow in leisure, such as surfers, rock climbers and sailors. Some individuals do not abandon jobs altogether, but shift the emphasis from work to leisure as the center of their lives.

The **shift** from prevalence of flow at work vs leisure four to five generations ago, to prevalence of flow during leisure vs work in the last two generations or so, has been a stark realization of the last century. Some of this change is due to the normal developmental patterns that every generation passes through: young people are always more dependent for enjoyment on artificial risk and stimulation. But these normal differences are magnified in communities undergoing **social and economic transition**. The exception would be traditional communities like the Amish and Mennonites who have been able to keep work and flow from getting separated. In the everyday routines of farming life, **it is difficult to know when work stops and leisure begins**. Is this the only way to preserve the integrity of a joyful and productive existence?

Or is it possible to **reinvent a lifestyle** that combines these traits within continuing evolutionary change?

To make the best use of free time, one needs to devote as much ingenuity and attention to it as one would one's job. Active leisure that helps a person grow **does not come easy**. In the past leisure was justified because it gave people an opportunity to experiment and develop skills. In fact, before science and the arts became professionalized, a great deal of scientific research,

poetry, painting, and musical composition was carried out **in a person's free time**. It is hard to imagine how dull the world would be if our ancestors had used free time simply for passive entertainment, instead of finding in it an **opportunity to explore beauty and knowledge**.

When the lifestyle of a social group becomes obsolete, when work turns into a boring routine and community responsibilities lose their meaning, it is likely that leisure will become increasingly more important. And if society becomes too dependent on entertainment, it is likely that there will be less psychic energy left to cope creatively with the technological and economic challenges **that will inevitably arise**.

How to avoid the **danger of a polarizing life** into work that is meaningless because it is unfree, and leisure that is meaningless because it has no purpose?

One possible way out is suggested by the example of the creative individuals discussed previously. **Creative persons** use the best knowledge from the past and present to discover a better way of being in the future. Thus, work itself becomes as enjoyable as leisure, and when one needs a break from it, leisure is likely to be true recreation instead of a scheme for dulling the mind. Luckily, the world is absolutely full of interesting things to do.

Only lack of imagination, or lack of energy and self-discipline, stand in the way.

Chapter 6 - Relationships and the Quality of Life

Of all the things we normally do, interaction with others is the **least predictable**. At one moment it is flow, the next apathy, anxiety, relaxation or boredom. There is no doubt that well-being is deeply attuned to relationships. As we move through the day, thinking about people and interacting with them plays constant riffs with our moods.

In most societies, people depend on the social context to an even greater extent than in the technological West. We believe that the individual should be left free to develop his or her potential, and at least since [Rousseau](#) we have come to think of society as a perverse obstacle to personal fulfillment. In contrast, the traditional view has been that the individual is nothing until shaped and refined through interaction with others.

But **socialization** not only shapes behavior, it also molds consciousness to the expectations and aspirations of the culture, so that we feel **shame** when others observe our failings, and **guilt** when we feel we have let others down. Here too cultures differ enormously in terms of how deeply the self depends on internalized community expectations.

Our ancestors realized a long time ago that they were **social** animals, that they depended on the group not only for protection but also for learning the amenities of life. The Greek word “idiot” originally meant someone who lived by himself; it was assumed that cut off from community interaction such a person would be mentally incompetent.

Because relationships are so important for keeping consciousness in balance, it is important to understand how they affect us, and learn how to turn them into positive experiences. As with anything else, one can not enjoy relationships for free. We must **expend** a certain amount of psychic energy to reap their benefits.

A relationship that leads to order in consciousness instead of psychic entropy (chaos) has to meet at least two conditions. The **first** is to find some **compatibility** between our goals and that of the other person or persons. If one looks for it, one can discover at least a shred of shared goals. The **second** condition is that one be willing to **invest attention** in the other person’s goals. Neither of these conditions are necessarily an easy task. However, when these conditions are met, it is possible to get the most valuable result from being with other people - to experience the flow that comes from optimal interaction.

The most positive experiences people report are usually with friends. **Friendships** are expected to provide mutual benefits, with no external constraints that might lead to exploitation. While many flow activities are enjoyable only in the short run, because their challenges are soon exhausted, friends offer potentially infinite stimulation throughout life, honing our emotional and intellectual skills. Of course, this ideal is not achieved very often.

Instead of promoting growth, friendships can often provide a safe cocoon where our self can be preserved without ever having to change. Peer groups such as clubs, associations, or drinking buddies, give a soothing sense of being a part of a like-minded set of people **without demanding effort or growth**. Concentration is usually significantly lower with friends than in solitude.

In the worst cases, when a person without other close ties comes to depend exclusively on other rootless individuals (gangs, terrorist cells, social media groups) for emotional support, “friendships” can be destructive. Because of their own fault or because of circumstances, these people have not found a niche in any **real community** and have only each other to confirm their identities.

Friendships offer both the most emotionally **rewarding** contexts in the immediate present, and the greatest opportunities for developing one’s potential in the long run. Contemporary life, however, is not very suitable for sustaining friendships. The geographical and social mobility in the United States (and elsewhere) makes this almost impossible. **Lack of true friends** is often the main complaint of people confronting an emotional crisis in the second half of life.

Another frequent cause of complaint is the lack of rewarding sexual relationships. **Sexuality** has been decontextualized from the rest of experience, and people have accepted the erroneous

notion that liberal doses of sex will make them happy. An evolutionary approach confirms the traditional teachings of the church that the original purpose of sexuality is making children and binding the parental couple. Just as gluttony has no relationship to hunger, an obsession with sex that is divorced from the other human needs such as **intimacy, caring, and commitment** becomes equally aberrant.

In our time, sexuality is encouraged so that people will channel their psychic energy into consumption of all manner of products and services that gives the illusion of fulfillment. A force that could result in some of the deepest and most intimate joys of life is taken over and **manipulated by outside interests**. Neither celibacy nor promiscuity are necessarily to our advantage; what counts is how we wish to order our lives, and what part we wish sexuality to play in it.

The **modern family**, with all its problems, opens up new possibilities for optimal experiences that were much more difficult to come by in previous times due to economic (inheritance) or political (status) necessity no longer strictly tied to it. Although there are and have been, many variations of the family within the same cultural tradition, all have prepared us to see the **dissolution** of the nuclear family, with 50% and higher divorce rates and the majority of children growing up in father-absent or reconstituted families. Is this a normal transition to a new form or a tragedy?

Although there are rigid views on either side this evolving social pattern, one constant has been that families included adults of the opposite sex who took on responsibilities for each others' welfare, and for that of their offspring. In all societies, the parents and relatives of the bride and groom took on the responsibility of **supporting and training** the offspring of the union, both in terms of material needs and of socialization into community values and rules. So far no society - not the Soviet Union, not Israel, not Communist China - has been able to finesse the family and substitute other social institutions in its stead.

The effects of family relationships on the quality of life are extensive - it acts as a **flywheel** for the emotional ups and downs of the day. Via the ESM sampling method, when both parents work, the husbands' moods are low at work and improve when at home - the opposite tends to be true for wives. There are more arguments in families that are emotionally close. Men are more concerned about what their children do, and women about how their children feel.

Families that support the emotional well-being and growth of their members combine: **discipline with spontaneity, rules with freedom and high expectations with unstinting love**. Rules and discipline are needed to avoid excessive waste of psychic energy in the negotiation of what can and can not be done and each person can draw on the collective psychic energy of the family if needed. Growing up in a complex family, children have a chance to develop skills and recognize challenges, and thus are more prepared to experience life as flow.

In Western society, the average person spends about one third of their waking time alone. Persons who spend much more or less time by themselves often have problems. In many preliterate societies, the optimal amount of time of solitude was zero. The mind of a solitary

individual is vulnerable to delusions and irrational fears. The fundamental function of even the most routine social encounters is **reality maintenance**, this is indispensable, lest consciousness disintegrate into chaos.

People tend to generally report much **lower moods** when alone. They feel less happy, less cheerful, more passive, more lonely. The only dimension of experience that tends to be higher alone is concentration. If one is an artist, scientist or writer; or if one has a hobby, or a rich inner life, then being alone is not only enjoyable but **necessary**. Few individuals master the mental tools that will make this possible. Engaging in screen time and social media would not be considered engaged in a "rich inner life" in this context - just **avoidance** of psychic entropy (chaos). The **concentration** to order thoughts and consider ideas in consciousness is easily interrupted by an extraneous word, by the necessity to pay attention to another person.

As **strangers** go, generally we assume that people who differ from us - in whatever context - will have goals at cross-purposes from ours, and therefore must be watched with suspicion. Even though we are genetically related, cultural differences serve to reinforce our isolation from each other. When reading histories of private lives, one is hard put to find any place, at any time, where people went about their business in serene cooperation, without fear of enemies from inside or outside the community. Many of the **current** social institutions - government, media, etc. - exploit apparent differences for personal gain in power and money. As we strive ever harder to create a safe and stimulating social environment in the future, **technology** will be a friend or an enemy, depending on how it is manipulated, and how often we consistently and consciously consider it for what it is and what it is not.

From the beginnings of Western philosophy, thinkers have conceived of **two main ways** of fulfilling human potentials. The first involved the *vita activa*, or the expression of one's being through action in the public arena (Greek philosophy). The second involved the *vita contemplativa*, or the achievement of fulfillment through solitary reflection, prayer, and communion with the supreme being (Christian philosophy). And these two strategies were usually seen as mutually exclusive - one could not be a doer and a thinker at the same time. This dichotomy still pervades our understanding of human behavior.

Extroversion and introversion can be considered the most stable personality traits that differentiate people and can be reliably measured. **Extroverts** love to interact with people but can feel lost when alone, **introverts** finding delight in solitude but struggle relating to people. Although studies provide evidence that extroverts are happier and less stressed than introverts, an extroverts penchant for putting a positive spin on things might affect their self-reporting.

In the study of **creative individuals**, instead of being either extroverts or introverts, such people seem to express both traits in the process of going about their lives. Beyond the solitude they seek to concentrate, they stress the importance of seeing people, hearing people, exchanging ideas, and getting to know another person's work,

The way these creative individuals confront life suggests that it is possible to be both extroverted and introverted at the same time. In fact, expressing the **full range** of inner- to outer-directedness might be the normal way of being human.

What is abnormal is to get boxed in at one of the ends of this continuum, and experience life only as a gregarious, or only as a solitary being.

Chapter 7 - Changing the Patterns of Life

In the United States alone, about **15 percent** of the population are never in flow - depriving themselves of what makes life worth living. A deprived childhood, abusive parents, poverty and a host of other external reasons make it difficult for a person to find joy in everyday life. On the other hand, there are so many examples of individuals who overcame such obstacles that the belief that the quality of life is determined from the outside is hardly tenable (defendable).

People who have overcome great obstacles to achieve great success like to do almost everything, no matter how difficult or trivial, including the things that they are forced to do. The only thing they definitely don't like to do is **waste time**. So it's not that their life is objectively better than yours or mine, but that their **enthusiasm** (mind set via ordered consciousness) for it is such that most of what they do ends up providing them with flow experiences.

Generally there are three main reasons that jobs are resented. The **first** is that the job is pointless - it does no good to anyone, and in fact it may be harmful. The **second** is that the work is boring and routine providing no variety or challenge. The **third** is that the job is stressful and where the person's contributions are not recognized. Contrary to popular opinion, concerns for money and security are not as important as these three issues.

We can't blame family, society, or history if our work is meaningless, dull or stressful.
We have to own this decision.

With increasing specialization, most occupational activities have become repetitive and one-dimensional. By taking the **whole context** of the activity into account, and understanding the impact of one's actions on the whole, a "trivial" job can turn into a memorable performance that leaves the world in a better shape than it was before. True group **leadership** would foster such a culture and ensure it is of the highest priority.

Those that are willing to **invest** psychic **energy and attention** into even a **dull or meaningless** job can draw additional meaning from it and increase the value of the job. If one spent the same amount of attention trying to find ways to accomplish more on the job, instead of cutting corners and doing the **absolute minimum**, one would enjoy working more. With some of the most important discoveries (radiation, penicillin, etc.), a humdrum event is transformed into a major discovery that changes the way we live because **someone paid more attention** to it than the situation seemed to warrant.

Most of us are **too distracted and detached** from consciousness to recognize when something (or anything) is happening.

Stress from a job can lead to high levels of **anxiety**. The word “stress” applies both to the tension we feel, and to the external causes. This ambiguity leads to the erroneous assumption that external stress must inevitably result in psychic discomfort. External stress (strain) need not lead to negative experiences.

At work, there are as many **sources** of strain as there are in life itself: unexpected crises, high expectations, insoluble problems of all sorts. A **first step** in keeping this strain from becoming stressful consists in establishing priorities among the demands that crowd into consciousness. Successful people often make lists and then prioritize which responsibilities are essential. After priorities are set some people work the easiest tasks first, some work the toughest challenges first. Either way, both strategies work. The important thing is to take the time, and make the effort, to develop a personal strategy to produce some kind of order. Order, in and of itself, reduces strain and anxiety.

Stop > **Breathe** > Consider/Prioritize > **Decide** > **Execute**

The **second step** is to match one’s skills with whatever challenges have been identified. Can the tasks that you feel incompetent to deal with be delegated? Can you learn the skills required in a timely fashion? Can you get help? Can the task be transformed, or broken up into simpler parts? Nothing will happen if one responds to the strain **passively**. One must invest attention into the ordering of tasks, into the analysis of what is required to complete them, into the strategies of solution. **Only by exercising control can strain be avoided**. Few learn to do this effectively.

The careers of creative individuals give some of the best examples of how one can shape work to one’s own requirements. Most creative persons don’t follow a career laid out for them, but invent their job as they go along. Following the rules, expectations, and status quo of “**the world**” can be a minimalist option to obtaining flow experiences for most if not all of us.

Besides work, the other major area that impacts on the quality of life is the kind of relationships we have - and there is often a conflict between work and relationships. Given that attention is a limited resource, when one goal takes up all our psychic energy, there is very little left for other areas of life. The **realistic goal** would be to find ways to **balance** the meaningfulness of the rewards we get from work and from relationships. Unless parents and children share ideas, emotions, activities, memories, and dreams, their relationship will survive only because it satisfies material needs. As a psychic entity, it will exist only at the **most primitive level**. Amazingly enough, many people refuse to see this point.

The roots of interpersonal conflict are often an excessive concern for oneself, and an inability to pay attention to the needs of others. People should and must realize that they could serve their own interests best by **helping others achieve theirs**. In most stable and well-run companies, leaders try to promote those who don't invest all their psychic energy in self-advancement, but use some of it to advance corporate goals. To be trusted in a position of leadership, it helps to advance other people's goals as well as one's own.

To gain something from talking to a person, one has to learn something new, either in knowledge or emotions. That requires both participants to **concentrate on the interaction**, which in turn demands psychic energy that generally we are unwilling to invest. Yet a genuine flow of conversation is one of the highlights of existence.

A good conversation is like a jam session in jazz, where one starts with conventional elements like interests or accomplishments and then introduces spontaneous variations that create an exciting new composition.

It takes a **total commitment to a fully experienced life**, one in which no opportunities are left unexplored and no potential undeveloped, to achieve excellence. To achieve this, you must acquire organization of the self.

Chapter 8 - The Autotelic Personality

Autotelic is a word composed of two Greek roots; auto (self) and telos (goal). **An autotelic activity** is one we do for its own sake because to experience it is the main goal. Applied to personality, autotelic denotes an individual who generally does things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve a later external goal.

There are obviously gradations from minimally autotelic to mostly autotelic, but in general an autotelic person needs few material possessions and little entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so much of what they do is already rewarding. Because such persons experience flow in most of life, they are **less dependent** on the external rewards that keep others motivated

to go on with a life composed of dull and meaningless routines. They are more **autonomous and independent**, because they can't be easily manipulated with threats or rewards from the outside. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them because they are **fully immersed** in the current of life.

In a study of **teenagers**, comparing those with the highest frequency of high-challenge, high-skill responses with those with the lowest responses, the higher autotelic group spent 11% of their time **studying** per week vs 6%, engaged in **hobbies** 6% of the time vs 3.5% and only 8.5% of their time watching **TV** vs 15.2% for the lower autotelic responders. Clearly an important dimension of what it means to be autotelic is what one does with one's time. **Passive leisure** and entertainment do not provide much opportunity to exercise one's skills and thus experience flow.

Autotelic youngsters concentrate more, enjoy themselves more, have higher self-esteem, and see what they do as more related to their future goals. Although they don't necessarily report being "happier", self-reported happiness is not a very good indicator of the quality of a person's life. Autotelic persons are not necessarily "happier", but they are involved in more complex activities, and they feel better about themselves as a result. **It is not enough to be happy to have an excellent life** (check your mind-set, change the context). The point is to be happy while doing things that stretch our skills, that help us grow and fulfill our potential. A teenager who feels "happy" doing nothing is unlikely to grow into a happy adult.

Another interesting finding is that autotelic teenagers spend a significantly higher amount of time interacting with the **family**. The family seems to act as a protective environment where a child can experiment in relative security, without having to be self-conscious and worry about being defensive or competitive.

Even though they have no greater attentional capacity than anyone else, autotelic people pay more attention to what happens around them and they are willing to do things for their own sake without expecting an immediate return. They are **less concerned with themselves**, and therefore have more psychic energy to experience life with. Most of us **hoard** attention carefully and dole it out only for objects worthy of our psychic energy: ourselves and the people and things that will give us some material or emotional advantage.

Creative individuals are usually autotelic as well, and they often achieve their breakthroughs personally and professionally because they gave surplus psychic energy to invest in apparently trivial objects and situations. The interest of an autotelic person is **not entirely passive and contemplative**. It involves an attempt to understand, to solve problems. The important point is that the interest is *disinterested*, in other words, that it is not entirely at the service of one's own agenda.

Only if attention is to a certain extent free of personal goals and ambitions do we have a chance of apprehending reality in its own terms.

Without *disinterested* interest life is uninteresting, as we save up energy to cope with the immediate demands of living. There is no room in it for wonder, novelty, surprise, for transcending the **limits** imposed by our fears and prejudices.

To develop curiosity and interest at any age, the **first step** is to develop the habit of doing whatever needs to be done with concentrated attention, with skill rather than inertia. The **next step** is to transfer some psychic energy each day from tasks that we don't like doing, or from passive leisure, into something we never did before, or something we enjoy doing but don't do often enough because it seems too much trouble. Time stress, or lack thereof, is one of the most popular complaints in pursuing other interests. More often than not, it is an **excuse** for not taking control of our lives. Everyone has 16 waking hours each and every day, every day of the year.

You can either discipline yourself and order your world -
or let the "world" do it for you.

Time is what one must find/create in order to develop interest and curiosity to enjoy life for its own sake. The other equally important resource is the ability to control psychic energy - we must learn to **concentrate** it more or less at will. Many of the things we find interesting are not so by nature, but because we took the trouble of paying attention to it.

To control attention means to control experience, and therefore, the quality of life.

Information reaches consciousness only when we attend to it and are not sleepwalking about in unconscious loops of cue, craving, response and reward - which is most of the time. **Attention** acts as a **filter** between outside events and our experience of them. How much stress/strain we experience depends more on **how well we control attention**, than on what happens to us.

In principle any skill or discipline one can master on one's own will serve: meditation and prayer, exercise, martial arts, music, etc., any specialization or expertise that one finds enjoyable and where one can improve one's knowledge over time. The important thing is to **enjoy the activity for its own sake**, and to know that what matters is not the result, but the control one is acquiring over one's attention and **self-discipline**.

Normally, attention is directed by genetic instructions, social conventions, and habits we learned as children. As a result, **our lives are not ours** in any meaningful sense; most of what we experience will be programmed for us. Through the years, our experience will follow the script

written by biology and culture. The only way to take over ownership of life is by learning to direct psychic energy in line with **our own intentions**.

Chapter 9 - The Love of Fate

Whether we like it or not, our lives leave a mark on the universe. Persons whose lives are autotelic reduce entropy (chaos) in the consciousness of those who come in contact with them; those who devote all of their psychic energy to competing for resources and aggrandizing their own self add to the sum total of entropy.

One can not lead a life that is truly excellent with feeling that one belongs to something greater and more permanent than oneself. In technologically advanced societies, **individualism and materialism** have almost completely prevailed over allegiance to the community and to spiritual values.

An active responsibility for the rest of humankind, and for the world of which we are a part, is a necessary ingredient of a good life. The real challenge, however, is to reduce entropy in one's surroundings without increasing it in one's consciousness. From the Buddhists, "**Act always as if the future of the Universe depended on what you did, while laughing at yourself for thinking that whatever you do makes any difference**". It is this serious playfulness, this combination of concern and humility, that makes it possible to be both engaged and carefree at the same time.

A first step out of this impasse is to gain a clearer understanding of one's **self** - the image each person develops about who he or she is. As soon as the "self" emerges in early childhood, it begins to control the rest of consciousness. A danger is that one's entire psychic energy will go toward satisfying the needs of the imaginary entity we have created. A self may grow to be insatiable for any number of reasons and/or have a completely **exaggerated** idea of its importance and thus likely to cause entropy in the environment as well as within consciousness.

If a person develops a self-image **based on power, or wealth**, unlike an animal who would rest when basic imperatives are accomplished, he or she will pursue the goals set by the self relentlessly, even if they have to ruin their health in the process, even if they have to destroy other people along the way.

The only viable alternative is to follow a less radical course, and make sure that one gets to know one's self, and understands its **peculiarities and tendencies**. It is then possible to separate those needs that really help us to navigate through life, from those malignant growths that sprout and make our lives miserable.

For all of us, the chief obstacle to a good life is oneself.

Once we realize what our harshest tendencies are, we need not fear them. Instead of taking them seriously, we can smile with compassion at the arrogance of these **fruits of our imagination**. We don't have to feed their ravenous hunger except on our own terms, when to do so helps us achieve something worthwhile.

In order to experience flow, it helps to have clear goals - not because it is achieving the goals that is necessarily important, but because without a goal it is difficult to **concentrate and avoid distractions**, both from the external world, and our inner "selves". Just the fact of doing something in line with one's goals improves the state of mind. A precursor action to this is to take ownership of one's actions and inactions. A great deal of what we do are things we feel like we have to do, or we do because there isn't anything else we feel like doing.

[Abraham Maslow's](#) studies led him, through observations and interview with individuals he considered to be self-actualizing, to conclude processes of growth resulted in fulfilling peak experiences and these involve a consistency between self and the environment, [Friedrich Nietzsche's](#) philosophy with the concept of *amor fati* - love of fate - suggests that the formula for greatness is that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. To not merely bear what is necessary, but love it. [Carl Rogers](#) suggested a fully functioning person: He wills or chooses to follow the course of action which is the most economical vector in relation to all the internal and external stimuli because it is that behavior which will be the most deeply satisfying.

It is the acceptance and ownership of one's actions that leads to personal growth, and provides the feeling of serene enjoyment which removes the burden of entropy and everyday life. However, the problem is that people also learn to love things that are destructive to themselves and to others. Flow is a source of psychic energy in that it focuses attention and motivates action. Like other forms of energy, it is neutral - it can be used for constructive or destructive purposes. We must also consider goals that will reduce the sum total of entropy in the world.

Where do we find such goals?

Per **religion**, we should strive to do good and reduce entropy in the world, to not sin and engage in behavior that harms people, the community, or its values. All societies that have survived have had to define positive goals to direct the energy of their people; to make them effective they shared their belief in supernatural beings who communicated the rules of right and wrong behavior through visions, apparitions and texts dictated to special individuals like Moses, Muhammed, or Joseph Smith. A community would be destroyed if everyone was motivated by sheer selfishness, so all religions had to provide a scenario for what happens to those who act only in terms of self-interest - such as being reincarnated in a lower form of life, or being forgotten, or going to hell.

There are enough hints about how the **universe** functions to know what kinds of actions support the increase of complexity and order, and what kind leads toward destruction. Each action produces a reaction in the universe, of this we can be fairly sure, regardless if we are aware of it in the reality we have created in our own minds.

Some suggest that the same reality may be packaged in **different bundles**, so to speak, and depending on the perspective of the viewer, the angle of vision, the time frame, and the scale of observation one might see very different pictures of the same underlying truth. Wisdom dictates that although this may be so, all of us have to decide what is right and wrong - and then ultimately own our decisions and live with the consequences. Ice cream is ice cream, regardless of the flavor.

Ironically, while **Darwin's observations** were justly seen as a threat to fundamentalist Christian religion, the idea that over very long periods of time ecological systems and the structure of organisms tend toward increasing complexity has given hope to several scientists that the universe is not ruled by chaos, but conceals a meaningful story. However, it is one thing for evolution to help us envision the future with reference to the past, and another to give us directions for creating a meaningful, satisfying existence.

Yet the findings of science may have hopeful things to say to each of us. In the first place, they make us increasingly aware of how **unique** each person is. Not only in our unique genetic code but also unique in the time and place in which we have been set to encounter life. Because a person becomes an individual only within a physical, social, and cultural context, when and where we happen to be born defines a single coordinate of existence that **no one else shares**.

Thus, each one of us is responsible for one particular point in space and time in which our body and mind forms a link within the total network of existence.

We call **evil** that which causes pain, suffering, disorder in the psyche or the community. It usually involves taking the course of least resistance, or operating according to the principles of a lower order of organization. Entropy, or evil is the default state, the condition to which systems return unless work is done to prevent it.

What prevents it is what we call **good** - actions that preserve order while preventing rigidity, that are informed by the needs of the most evolved systems. Acts that take into account the future, the common good, the emotional well-being of others. Good is the creative overcoming of inertia, the energy that leads to the evolution of human consciousness. To act in terms of new principles of organization is always more difficult, and requires effort and energy. The ability to do so is what has been known as virtue.

Hell in this scenario is the separation of the individual from the flow of life, from blending their consciousness with time and evolution whose currents all become one. It is clinging to the past, to the self, to the safety of inertia.

How can we find goals that will allow us to enjoy life while being responsible to others?

Within the **evolutionary** framework, we can focus consciousness on the tasks of everyday life in the knowledge that when we act in the fullness of the flow experience, we are also building a bridge to the future of our universe. Within the **Christian** framework, we should practice directed consciousness in our availability to the Spirit, and let that Spirit guide us to the flow experiences that will help lead others to the answers of life provided by God, through Christ. In essence, our own, personal flow experiences, in all their flavors and forms, are created by God, and may provide our best inkling as to what Heaven might be like for each of us.